

*Spirits in Culture, History, and Mind*, edited by Jeannette Marie Mageo and Alan Howard. New York and London: Routledge, 1996. ISBN 0-415-91368-3 (cloth); ISBN 0-415-91367-5 (paper), vii + 282 pages, map, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$18.95.

The editors of this fascinating collection identify two objectives: "to examine the changing roles that gods and spirits have played in various cultures, relating them on the one hand to specific historical and cultural contexts, and on the other to cultural and psychological universals" (2). That these two objectives fail to really jell I suspect can be accounted for by the very characteristics of spirits that the editors and authors identify. "Spirits," as they are usually understood in Oceanic contexts, are marginal entities: they exist on the boundaries of the "moral" and "divine," to use Kenelm Burridge's formula, and thus are amorphous, amoral, unpredictable, and unavoidable. Spirits simultaneously defend and defy whatever is ordered and established. People easily attribute spiritual influences to a wide variety of events, but they often do not agree on the details. Indeed, they are frequently of different minds concerning even the reality of particular spirits or their presumed actions. Drawing on Bakhtin, Niko Besnier here aptly describes this creative chaos as "glossalalia."

Like explaining a joke, studies of the "universals" of spirits inevitably remove something from their object. Robert Levy, Jeannette Mageo, and Alan Howard are keenly aware of this, and in their overview chapter limit

themselves mostly to typology. They place spirits in a continuum of belief running from the most amorphous sprites to well-defined gods. They provide a good overview of conventional understandings of the relations between types of spirits and forms of social organization, ideas of selfhood, personal experiences of the divine, and morality. Michael Lambek, in the concluding chapter, discusses spirits as a particularly inventive play of the religious imagination, experienced most personally and vividly in episodes of possession. He stresses the importance of understanding experiences and talk of spirits as a type of discourse that draws from and is perceived as speaking to the social and moral context within which it is embedded (an observation that Tamar Gordon illustrates vividly in her chapter on possession in Tonga). Possession and other forms of spiritual encounter reveal something of the hegemonic underpinnings of a particular culture in a particular time.

The great strength of this collection lies in the ethnographic chapters. All are well-crafted and engagingly written by anthropologists with considerable field experience. Six of the chapters examine Polynesian communities: Mageo on Sāmoa, Howard on Rotuma, Besnier on Nukulaelae, Gordon on Tonga, and Richard Feinberg on Anuta. David Akin writes about the Kwaio of Malaita, and Harvey Whitehouse contributes a chapter on a Baining community in New Britain. Chapters by Francis X Hezel and Jay D Dobbin on Chuuk, and Douglas Hollan on the Toraja of Sulawesi, round out the book.

The literature on indigenous reli-

gion in Oceania is replete with information on spirits. The studies here confirm much that is already widely understood about the articulation between spirit beliefs and actions and social structure; about the social dynamics of sorcery accusations and gossip; about the play of possession and divining as commentaries on social conditions and morality; about the centrality of possession in the definition and challenge of gender roles; and a host of other issues. Taken collectively, these studies make their most novel and important contribution by placing ideas and experiences of spirits in a historical context—indeed, as active contributors to the making of local histories. While each study deals with particular societies, some intriguing general patterns can be glimpsed.

First, conversion to Christianity has led everywhere to a general demotion of spirits. On Sāmoa, Tonga, Anuta, and Chuuk, the contact religions included important ceremonies of possession and divination, with spirits and gods that affirmed the authority of chiefs and hierarchical principles. These collapsed under Christian pressure and, one suspects, through the expedient of replacing the old deities with the Christian god, who also resided at the head of a hierarchy (with clergy as earthly representatives). Among the Kwaio, Baining, and Toraja this process is still very much underway and very visible. Indeed, the unremitting opposition of Christians may have encouraged traditionalist Kwaio and followers of the Kivung movement on New Britain to objectify ancestral spirits, making them more godlike.

A second related observation, made in most of the studies, is that spirits have not been so much displaced by Christianity as recontextualized. They are still available for a variety of roles. General assumptions about the role of spirits in causing illness and other mischief form a common ground, even in the religiously divided communities, as Whitehouse shows for the Baining. Where Christianity is well entrenched, those somewhat marginalized in the social system (notably women) are more likely to experience involuntary possession and exhibit sometimes bizarre behavior that challenges social norms. Mageo's study of Sāmoa provides an excellent example of how even the more personal forms of possession behavior show clear continuities with cultural forms and understandings of the past while forming a fertile ground for evolving notions of self and community.

Finally, Pacific Islanders are also gaining new understandings of spirits as their communities become less isolated and more incorporated into global systems. Nukulaelae Islanders, all good Christians who castigate those among themselves who may converse with spirits, feel free to visit non-Nukulaelae mediums on other islands, who in turn feed them salacious gossip concerning the spiritual goings-on back home. Kwaio traditionalists must deal with the deliberate and accidental importation into their lands of foreign spirits that they perceive as working insidiously to undermine the ancestors. In places like Rotuma and Sāmoa, where most people have become accustomed to "modern conveniences" like roads, motorcycles, and electric lights,

the landscape is losing its enchanted ambience; the spirits (and one suspects the Christian god as well) seem less salient to people than they once did.

The rich chapters in this collection offer the reader much to ponder. The editors are to be commended for holding writers to central themes and for laying out these themes clearly in the overview chapters. Different as the approaches and people are, the chapters read very well together. Read individually, they provide a model of historically sensitive ethnographic writing. Covering familiar ground, the authors also provide a nuanced portrait of changing attitudes toward spirits in several not untypical settings—a topic that is only beginning to receive attention in anthropology and religious studies. I would give this book my highest recommendation.

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*Social Reproduction and History in Melanesia: Mortuary Ritual, Gift Exchange, and Custom in the Tanga Islands*, by Robert J Foster. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-521-48030-2 (cloth), 0-521-48332-8 (paper), xxii + 288 pages, glossary, photographs, figures, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$64.95; paper, US\$29.95.

This book derives from Robert Foster's doctoral thesis (University of Chicago 1988). The main fieldwork for the study was carried out in 1984–1985, with two additional visits in 1992. As the title suggests, the ethnographic focus of this study is on mortuary rituals in the Tanga Islands, New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea. However, Foster is not content with presenting his detailed historical and ethnographic analyses of mortuary feasts in a changing society. He aims also to illustrate how two quite distinct analytical approaches that have emerged in Melanesian studies during the last decade, the “new Melanesian ethnography” and the “new Melanesian history,” may be profitably combined to create a new (Melanesian) anthropology that is well equipped to address issues of both social reproduction and social transformation. Foster uses the term *new Melanesian ethnography*, originally coined by Josephides, to refer to an approach that presupposes a recognition of “radical alterity,” the existence of fundamental cultural differences between Melanesian and western societies. Key repre-